THE CHRISTIAN AND THE UNITED NATIONS

by

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PHILOSOPHICALLY, the United Nations has its roots in the Christian past. Its future depends on the extent to which those roots are nourished by Christians living today. The whole conception of a universal temporal order we owe to one of the greatest Christian thinkers and poets who has ever lived—Dante Alighjeri, who was born seven centuries ago. Hitherto the one universal society of which Christian philosophers had spoken was the Holy Catholic Church; in Dante's scheme the secular Empire was to be co-terminous with the human race. Aristotle provided the starting point of this train of Dante's thought. He had noted that "men come together in cities in order to live: they remain together in order to live the good life." He did not, however, realise that the peace and order of the city-state demands a universal peace and order: but Dante did. The Christian poet had the vision to see that a universal human community is necessary if man, the one creature endowed with reason, is to fulfil his potentialities, and if peace and human progress are to be secured.

The empire, as Dante conceived it, was never more than a poet-philosopher's dream. The reality, the Holy Roman German Empire, was very different from the ideal, as we know from our history books. Yet the conception of the Christian monarch, deriving his authority through the Church from God, did help to weld the tribes and peoples of Europe into a society of nations, a Christian Commonwealth. In the Middle Ages, as today, the thinkers, the intellectuals, were very much in advance of the doers, the practical statesmen and politicians. As Canon Roger Lloyd reminds us*, in their effort to create a united Christendom and to make it a theocratic reality of peace and freedom, the medieval thinkers relied on three great formative instruments—the Church, the Empire, and the whole range of education culminating in the

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**"The Golden Middle Age"*

university. Everything turned on the harmonious co-operation of these three instruments of civilisation, and at the centre of the medieval ideal lay always the vision of this full and unimpaired harmony. The great periods are those in which the harmony comes somewhere near to full existence. The dark centuries are those in which it breaks down. Twice it comes within sight of a real fulfilment, first in the 9th century under Charlemagne, and then again in the 12th and 13th centuries under the impetus of the universal passion for Christian learning.

Charlemagne's magnificent effort failed because of the inability of his successors to sustain the mighty vision of a united Church and Empire which, in some degree, he actually achieved. The revival of the 12th and 13th centuries was finally betrayed by many agents, among them, we must admit, the worldliness of Christians. This failure to achieve the more distant and absolute aims of the Christian commonwealth set in motion a stream of cause and effect which, in the supreme revolution of the Reformation, finally destroyed the vision of an ordered, civilised Christian society, building its life on the medieval synthesis. Whatever may be our views concerning the theological controversies of the 16th century we must admit that the resultant breakdown of Western unity was a tragedy from which we are still suffering today. Why was it that this unity was so short-lived? As we watch Dante's ideal of a world state dwindling into a German Reich, and the Universal Church itself being rent by schism and sectarianism: see the social morality of Christendom—its Just Price and its condemnation of usury—being accommodated to the requirements of the rising commercial class, the guilds decaying, and the peasants losing their land, it seems that the spiritual energy of Christian civilisation was, for the time being at least, exhausted when the high noon of the Middle Ages was passed. There is, of course, no question today of returning to a certain moment in the 13th century and starting again from there. To be a neo-medievalist in that sense is to be a romantic reactionary. But because history is not pure flux—because cultures and societies maintain a certain identity throughout their many changes—we cannot isolate ourselves, even in thought, from our Christian and medieval past. The world civilisation which we have today is unthinkable apart from its roots in the Christian culture of Europe. Even secular humanism owes something to the

belief in God it so strenuously denies or ignores, and it is not at all certain that it will retain such ideals as it possesses if it remains agnostic concerning the existence of God and the primacy of spirit, the supreme affirmations of Christian thought.

In the deepest sense, the issue before the world today is a religious one, for as Bergson discovered at last, the Brotherhood of Man will never become a reality until men have learnt to exchange their conflicting and parochial loyalties for one common allegiance to a heavenly Father. That may sound like a conclusion. And in a sense of course it is. But my subject is the Christian and the United Nations. I have attempted to approach it by the way of history, but before thinking a little of the attitude of the individual Christian to the United Nations Organisation and world affairs today, I would like to get behind the Middle Ages and the historical attempts which have been made to clothe the ideal of human brotherhood in mundane political forms, and consider for a moment what Christianity—what the New Testament—has to tell us about the fundamentals of our subject. Indeed, we shall have to go back further still, and take a look at the Old Testament. In the beginning, we read in the Book of Genesis, God created heaven and earth. This is God's world. And into that world God put man, created in His own image. "And God created man to his own image, to the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them," says the Sacred Narrative.

For Aristotle and the old philosophers the basis of the whole conception of the solidarity and unity of the human race was man's reason. For the Christian it is man's relationship with God. We are all sons and daughters of one Father: whatever our race or nation, we belong to one family, God's family. And, more startling still, human beings have been created in the image of their Creator. Here, I am afraid, it is impossible to avoid the introduction of a doctrine which you may regard as a controversial one. I mean the doctrine of original sin. Theological debate has thundered around this subject for centuries. Some of the Reformers taught that man's rebellion and fall, his pride and his attempted self-sufficiency, had obliterated God's image in the human soul. The central tradition of Christendom, however, insists that original sin has not entirely replaced original virtue. The

Divine Image is tarnished, yet it remains. And because it remains, the solidarity and essential unity of the human race *is* a reality. Of course, whatever our views about sin and grace may be—however indifferent we may imagine ourselves to be about these theological terms—we shall all agree that there is a fatal flaw in man's moral make-up which, throughout history, time and time again, has resulted in the breakdown of human endeavours to create a just society and a peaceful society. We have only to read our newspapers to realise how that same factor is at work today in the international field. Does it follow then that the United Nations, being a human institution made up of fallible, sinful men and women, is no more capable of fulfilling its high aims than was, for example, the Roman Empire or the Christian Empire which succeeded it in Europe? The answer to that question, surely, depends on us Christians, on you and me. As followers of Jesus Christ we know, if we know anything at all, that *without Him we can do nothing*. We know that there can be no enduring human brotherhood which does not acknowledge the Fatherhood of God. We know that, in the words of St. James, war is caused by the appetites which infest our mortal bodies—that it is the result of wrong thinking and wrong doing. But we also know that Christians are intended by their Master to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth. We who follow Him may still be the minority among the 2,000 million human beings who inhabit this earth, but—if we do His will, and that's what we're here for—we shall act as the leaven.

So it seems to me that it is wrong for the Christian to say that because the United Nations is a human institution whose members include atheists, humanists, Hindus, Buddhists, Moslems, etc., it can never be the instrument of the Divine purpose. Let us consider, for a moment, St. Paul's attitude to the Roman Empire. The Empire was pagan, idolatrous and in many ways corrupt, yet the Apostle taught that the magistrates were to be obeyed because they exercised a power delegated to them from God Himself. If prayers for all men were to be offered by the faithful, "kings and all that are in high station" were to be specially mentioned, since on them depended whether the Christians could live their lives in peace and quiet. Historically, of course, it is a fact that the *Pax Romana*, the straight Roman roads, and the Roman

judicial system made possible the rapid growth of Christianity. I do not want to press the analogy too far, but surely there is no doubt that from New Testament times the central Christian tradition on this subject has been to make use of, to work through, human institutions. What applies to the State, with all its imperfections, applies in like manner to the world organisation made up of many states. It can never be a rival to or an alternative to the Catholic Church. Even if world government became a fact and all the problems of poverty, under-nourishment, and disease were solved, man would still need the grace of Jesus Christ as much as he does now. But of course world government never will become a fact, and the problems of poverty, under-nourishment and disease never will be solved *unless* enough Christians, living lives of devoted, loving service in Christ's name, are to be found to make our world institutions work. The humanist approach is to get on with the job and not to worry about religious beliefs and moral standards. The Christian approach is "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His Justice and all these things shall be added unto you." But that does not mean that the Christian does nothing but cultivate his own spiritual life until the Kingdom of God has come. The Kingdom of Heaven, we are told on the best of all possible authorities, is within you. But we are also taught to pray, *Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

Our job, then, is to discover the Kingdom within us by living a life of grace in the Mystical Body of Christ, and to realise that Kingdom on earth, in the conditions of space and time, by doing God's will—in our personal lives and in our public lives, as individuals and a parents, as employees and employers, as citizens of the United Kingdom and as citizens of the United Nations. It follows, then, that the United Nations is a field in which God's will can be carried out just as the parish council, the county council or the national state is. And as Christians we must ask ourselves: What is God's will for the United Nations? And how can that will be carried out? The Christian Faith has something to say in reply to both of those questions. God's purpose for the U.N. I humbly believe, is that it shall become His instrument. Unless it is that, it is nothing. And it is our task, God helping us, to make it His instrument. Here all the responsibility might seem to rest upon the statesmen. After all, *we* don't

sit in the General Assembly, *we* don't belong to the Security Council, *we* are not entrusted with the cares of the Secretariat. No, but our representatives are in a very real sense our voices. If public opinion is indifferent to the causes of the United Nations, *they* are not likely to make them the centre and pivot of their foreign policy. If public opinion favours selfish policies, our statesmen are not likely to pursue altruistic ones Even in a dictatorial state, the government must reflect to some extent the mood and temper of the people. Democratic statesmen are more bound than dictators by the beliefs, wishes and—be it noted—the behaviour of the people they represent. For what we call public opinion is the attitude of mind of millions of human souls. I help to create it: you help to create it—by what we believe, by what we say, by what we think, by what we do. As citizens, and, above all as Christians, we cannot, we dare not, shift the responsibility for world peace and world welfare on to the shoulders of the politicians. Or, rather, we are bound to share that responsibility.

Think for a moment of the work that is being done by the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Children's Fund. Think of the U.N. team of doctors and nurses which visited an Eastern village where most of the children were suffering from a horrible disease called yaws—a disease that distorts minds as well as bodies, and for which, so far as the unhappy villagers knew, there was no cure. Science had discovered a cure—the injection of penicillin—and the United Nations made it possible for the healing gift of science to be brought to that little jungle community. The injections were given. The ghastly swellings and sores disappeared. The pain-racked faces became happy and radiant. Something more than health was given to that village. Hope was given, joy was given, life was given.

> *. . . I was hungry, and you gave me to eat: I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink: I was a stranger, and you took me in. Naked, and you covered me: sick, and you visited me: I was in prison, and you came to me . . . Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me.*

There can be no doubt that the humanitarian work which is being carried out all over the world by U.N. agencies is

Christ's work, even though some of those who perform it may not themselves be Christians. And I am convinced that the best hope of the nations finding solutions for the formidable political problems which divide them is to be found in working together to overcome the practical problems of human suffering and poverty. But let us beware of the humanist heresy. Ultimately, it is certain that there will be no world to improve unless the way is found to peace. And peace, remember, is not just the absence of war, it is the tranquillity of Order. And what is Order but right relationship between the parts and the Whole. We are the parts.

The world needs desperately a new statesmanship. But a new statesmanship depends in its turn on a new citizenship, and that's our business. With truth it has been said: "We are in the midst of the breakdown of civilisation—war in the home, war in industry, war between the nations. What is the future? Further disintegration, chaos, anarchy and dictatorship? Or the birth of a new society, brought about by a revolutionary change in human nature? The Holy Spirit is the most powerful Force in the world today. Man can split the atom. The Holy Spirit is uniting humanity through men who listen to Him and obey . . . Armies and pacts and economic assistance are necessary. But the deciding factor is whether as men and nations we are guided by the voice of materialism or the Voice of God."

Remember Christian in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. "I am for certain informed," said he, "that this our city will be burned with fire from Heaven—in which fearful overthrow both myself with thee my wife and you my sweet babes shall miserably come to ruin, except (the which yet I see not) some way of escape can be found, whereby we may be delivered."

And, in conclusion, read the comment on that passage made by one of our greatest living historians, Professor Arnold Toynbee, in his *Study of History**:

> "What response to this challenge is Christian going to make? Is he going to look this way and that as if he would run, yet stand still because he cannot tell which way to go? Or will he begin to run—and run on crying

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* *Abridgement by D. C. Somervell.*

'Life! Life! Eternal Life!'—with his eye set on a shining light and his feet bound for a distant wicket-gate? If the answer to this question depended on nobody but Christian himself, our knowledge of the uniformity of human nature might incline us to predict that Christian's imminent destiny was death in his City of Destruction. But in the classic version of the myth we are told that the human protagonist was not left entirely to his own resources in the decisive hour. According to John Bunyan, Christian was saved by his encounter with Evangelist. And, inasmuch as it cannot be supposed that God's nature is less constant than Man's, we may and must pray that a reprieve which God has granted to our society once will not be refused if we ask for it again in a humble spirit and with a contrite heart."

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